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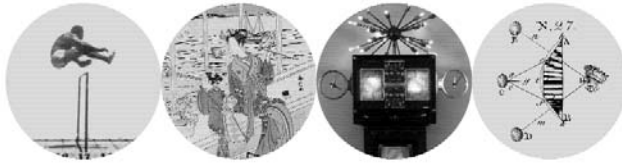
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journal of visual culture



Translators' Notes¹

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Abstract

Translators' Notes begins and departs with *PIDGIN: interrupted transmission* (2001), a multi-vocal, multi-screen sound and video installation by Singapore-born, British-based artist, Erika Tan. As a collection of my sometime artist-writer-translator's notes – on translators' notes – this article tracks the release and flutter of pigeons/pidgins across 'contact zones'. Aerial diversions and oral digressions, provoking and provoked by territorial skirmishes, point to some of the concerns and tactics of diasporic artist-contemporaries practising between Britain and Hong Kong. Engaging issues around the politics and poetics of speaking and translating 'poorly', the assertion of political power and authority via linguistic 'standards', the conflation of linguistic competence with cultural and ethnic 'authenticity', and the particular role or 'business' of 'Chinglish' in the construction of pre- and post-handover Hong Kong identities, as well as representations and contestations of 'China' and the 'West', the author concludes with a proposition: that the peculiar insights and sites of 'pidgin' may enable us to better recognize the inevitability, and pleasures, of 'pidgin' cultures.

Keywords

Chinese • English • installation • language – pidgin • Erika Tan • translation • visual arts

Interrupted Transmission

This writing belongs, not to a monument outside the history it narrates, nor to a philosophical system of the kind Marx was striving to leave behind, but to a practice of communication, a process of writing and rewriting, what the Situationists called 'detourning,' or the appropriation and retooling of phrases, terms, polemics. (Wark, 1999: 22)

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Pidgin [pij'in] 1. a minimal second language that is a combination of the vocabulary and pronunciation patterns of two or more languages, created when groups speaking mutually unintelligible languages have a need to communicate, as for trade or negotiations; grammatically, it usually is a simplified form of one of the languages. 2. loosely, any simplified or abridged form of a language used by non-native speakers. (Said to be from a Chinese mispronunciation of the word business within Chinese Treaty ports.) (Willmoth, 2002: unpaginated)



Figure 1 *PIDGIN: interrupted transmission*, installation photographs. Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella in association with Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art and Design. Supported by Arts Council England. Images © 2001 Erika Tan and Bevis Bowden.

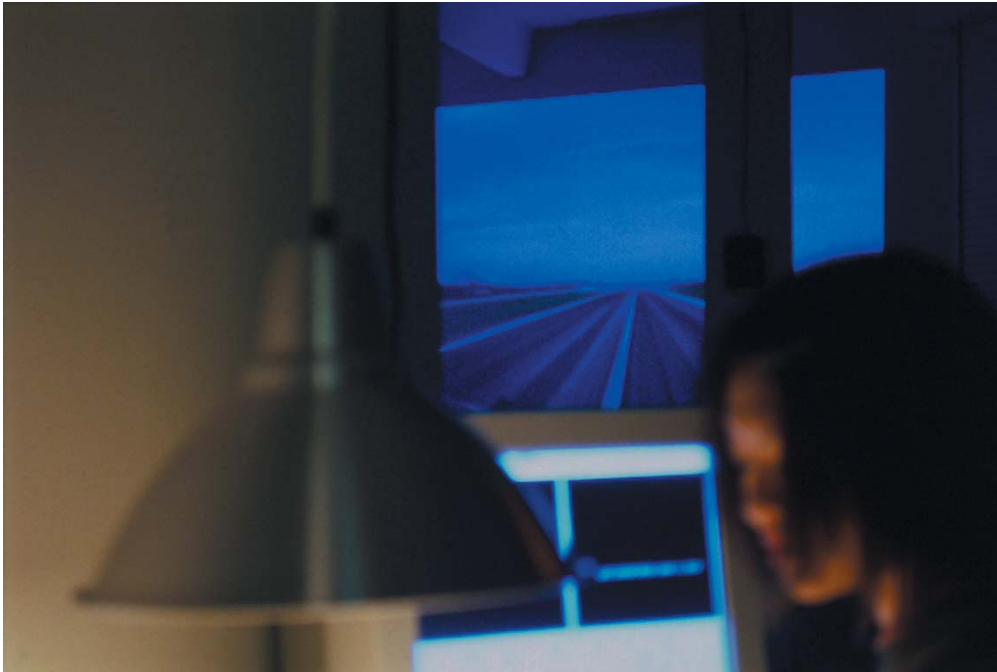
Blinds down, the gallery is darkened, dim. Light flickers, bouncing from double projections that double the dimensions, two to four, of obliquely opposing walls. Pigeons flock, stilled mid-flight in black and white, later flying into and past the artist's lens, colourful; a head in profile, lips moving, whispers (– me, my lips to E.'s ear); pages of texts in unfamiliar scripts; text messages, abbreviations and decodings; and aerial views of a flat, indistinct landscape. Somewhere in the sequence comes the announcement, 'an

exercise in: phonological stretching'. Falling for the authority of the caption, an old love of linearity re-surfacing, I catch myself wondering if I have arrived, by chance, at the beginning, realizing much later that there is none, no one, only many. Talking heads ensue, speaking heavily accented, halting versions of English, awkward shapes of words coming uneasily from ill-practised mouths. From the spoken to the written: texts appear fleetingly, white on black, again in various languages – too briefly to be caught, and only then by speed-reading multi-linguists. This is followed by a slow and suspenseful game of whispers: from me to E. . . . to E. . . . D. . . . A. . . . P, M. . . . J., J., A. (or is this a later round?) . . . and finally to S., who tells us, 'Language is a skill that relates to a toy.'

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.²



Figure 2 *PIDGIN: interrupted transmission*, installation photographs. Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella in association with Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art and Design. Supported by Arts Council England. Images © 2001 Erika Tan and Bevis Bowden.



Figures 3 and 4 *PIDGIN: interrupted transmission*, installation photographs. Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella in association with Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art and Design. Supported by Arts Council England. Images © 2001 Erika Tan and Bevis Bowden.

PIDGIN: interrupted transmission (2001), a multi-media installation by the artist Erika Tan, takes up the thematics of some of her earlier works, refracting the discursive construction, classification and dissemination of orientalist identities, histories, cultures and knowledges, through the dark liquid glass of language (see Figures 1–7).³ This article/foray begins with – restages – a series of shared scenarios that invoke the commonality of its players as artists and diasporic subjects, underpinned less by an indubitable, unwavering ‘Chineseness’ (or for that matter, ‘Britishness’) than by an assumption of awkward and pleasurable multiplicities and uncertainties. Tongue-tied and tripped, ‘pidgins’ flutter; these travel/*travail*, make-do and work the scenes, performing and enunciating enduring questions around the politics and poetics of speaking and translating; invoking the conflation of linguistic competence with cultural and ethnic ‘authenticity’, of notions of diaspora with ‘home’; presaging the inevitability of ‘pidgin’ languages and cultures; and alerting a sometime artist-writer-translator to exercise with caution her notes on translators’ notes.

In *PIDGIN*, questions of cultural origin, authenticity and meaning are raised via expositions of ‘the heteroglossia, the productivity, multiplicity, and the open-ended nature of language’, in the form of ‘borderline skirmishes’ (Willmoth, 2002: unpaginated). The complex and ambitious project appears to take as its starting point the task of defining and locating the origins of ‘pidgin’. And yet, while various definitions can indeed be found within the overall work, Tan’s project is not so much to define as to mediate as a site at/through which multiple meanings and processes might coalesce or contradict each other, as ‘a site where incongruous things can meet’ (Trinh, 1999: 69). Theory and practice are necessarily embroiled in ‘aspects of language and translation’ within a wider, open-ended inquiry (Steiner, 1975). Mixing and stretching metaphors, offsetting the written, in varieties of immutable print and idiosyncratic hand, with the elusive and infinitely elastic spoken, Tan’s work maps a difficult and disjointed trajectory of loops, slippages and double-takes, exploring the always already perforated ‘contact zones’, ‘zones of domination’ as well as ‘mediation’ between cultures, via the ‘contact languages’ of pidgin that inhabit and transgress their borders.⁴ Solemn, overwhelming, at turns alienating and engaging, *PIDGIN: interrupted transmission* is perhaps most affecting in the seemingly unaffected moments of bewilderment, frustration and pleasure, during affectations – or stagings – of play.

Pidgin, Pigeon

Do you hear ‘pidgin’ or ‘pigeon’?⁵ Footage of carrier pigeons being tagged, released, and variations of, recur; a single pigeon in flight, close-ups of pigeons in a loft. Black and white stills of pilots with pigeons amid cheering crowds parallel later colour moving image footage from a cockpit, the pilot faintly heard but unseen as he navigates a plane over green fields, eventually coming in to land. The play on ‘pidgin’/‘pigeon’ enacts a slippage that registers as a visual and written pun but not in the spoken;⁶ a gap in

translation that casts doubt on the transparency and stability of language as a mere tool of communication, or reliable means of representation.

This doubt is embodied by the struggles of Tan's filmic subjects to speak. Tackling texts translated into English, then phonetically transcribed into each speaker's so-called 'mother tongue', languages and meanings become emphatically distanced, several times removed for both speaker and audience. Thus, a range of strangely inflected, splintered English(es) are rendered through a collage of approximate sounds in Mandarin/Putonghua Chinese, Greek(s), Arabic, Dutch and Afrikaans (already classified by many as a pidgin or creole), into alternative pidgin languages.⁷ Halting the sometimes frenetic flow of images, altering the pace and space of the work, each hesitation signals a lack of symmetry between signifier and signified, gesturing towards the elusive/inventive nature of meaning construction, communication and translation.

:-) smile:**D** big grin:-**I** grim face;-) wink:**P** sticking out tongue
 {{{{{{ }}}}} lots of hugs
 :'(crying:-& tongue-tied:-)**X**(-: kiss ('{ ') boy and girl kissing
 (_) ? [_]? coffee or tea
 C[[]] a pint of beer > ^ , ^ < cat <:3) ~ mouse ^ (oo) ^ spider
 <(((< fish @ (*O*) @ koala ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ ^ ~ 8 > snake
 > < * . * > < crab @ (- _) @ Princes Leia (_8(I) Homer Simpson
 @@@@8 (I) Marge Simpson (:::[]:::) Band Aid
 SS > <))) "> Something Smells Fishy
AFK Away From Keyboard **ATK** At The Keyboard **BBL** Be Back Later
B4N By For Now
BRB Be Right Back **FWIW** For What It's Worth **GMTA** Great Minds
 Think Alike **IMHO** In My Humble Opinion **LOL** Laughing Out Loud
LTNS Long Time No See **TTFN** Ta-Ta For Now **TTYL** Talk To You Later
OIC Oh I See **L8R** Later **SI** Sarcasm Intended **OOO** Out Of Order
SOMY Sick of Me Yet? **GLB4UGH** Get Lost Before You Get Hurt
WYBMADITY Will You Buy Me A Drink If I Tell You?
 (Tan, in Tan and Willmoth, 2002)

Gaps between acts of speaking and writing, enunciation and inscription, spoken and written, are accentuated by the contrast of stalled speech-acts and accelerated modes of writing represented by SMS mobile phone text messaging (and imaging), based on abbreviations and alphanumeric strings which function 'more like a specialized orthography (spelling conventions) . . . than an actual pidgin'. For Tan, text messaging is demonstrative of 'the creation of a language on a minute level' (unattributed quotes, Willmoth, 2002). Inscribing a poetics of interruption, disjunctures between registers are further compounded by the relationship between video and audio tracks, and underscored by the formal arrangement of objects in the space. Two projections are framed by opposing walls that, like their content, are slightly askew. Not-quite parallel, not-quite mirror – one is set at an angle, subtly distinguishing the space, like an accent over a vowel.

Unsynchronized passages shift attention to six speakers, whose visibility foregrounds their role as output mechanisms, artificial mouths similarly estranged from their 'words' and 'utterances'. Emitting varied sounds, they bear forth the tappings of a telegraphic transmission (morse code perhaps), sounds of a woman singing in Chinese, radio stations tuning in and out, and with them, voices and languages veering and swerving towards and away from each another, before disappearing into the 'silence' of background interference; pigeons coo; a phone rings – or is that coming from the gallery office? An appropriate interference nonetheless.

A computer monitor supplies a third screen, not a means of active engagement but an additional viewing mechanism, appearing to make transparent the workings of the piece via an overall 'timeline'. The technology used to create the work and control different devices (two DVD players and a CD player, 'switching each one on and off, locating specific sections within a disk to create a dialogue with the different elements of the work'), is sophisticated yet unable to 'converse' with seamless jumps: 'It takes a couple of seconds to "locate" and "trigger" the next bit of footage. As it jumps, there is a break in transmission' (Tan and Willmoth, 2002).

Digital media is utilized in extrapolation of video's

potential to become a conceptual technology, one that can look at the history of the image, of sound/sense articulation in language and speech, and of narrative through a refiguration of space and a multiple mapping of time. (Turim, 1990: 342).

On closer inspection, the timeline reveals itself to be something of a comforting 'ruse', its structure artificial, its simplifications belying discrepancies and lapses in timing between the representation and encounter of image/sound events. Like the contents of an accompanying 'research book', presented without 'beginning or ending or index' (Tan and Willmoth, 2002), supplementing, coinciding with, and distracting from other parts of the work, this third screen offers only an illusory unifying meta-narrative: far from transparent, the black background, at once flat and fathomless, simply conceals and swallows the excesses.

Is it a coincidence that we name the most inventive, innovative and homely uses of language as pidgin? (Papastergiadis, 2002)

From 'pidgin' to 'pigeon' and back again – the slippage suggests the latter as metaphor for the former, language as carrier, bearer or messenger of meanings picked up and dropped intact, a mode of delivery. However, the recurrence of ruptured speech-acts and indeterminate sounds evokes language as an always already interrupted transmission, dispossessed of its source. Tensions between such formulations are intimated in the juxtaposition of 'carriers' – carrier pigeons, aircraft carriers, carrier waves. Unlike pigeons and aircraft, which may be prescribed routes and destinations, the electromagnetic waves modulated to carry a signal in, for

example, radio transmission, guarantee no single, final point of arrival. Birds take off, planes come in, compelled or instructed by a necessity to 'home', to return to/from a/loft. Contrasting predetermined schedules of departure and return, sounds diffuse in multiple directions, after in(de)finite, indeed infinite courses. As meanings slide, deferred with each reverberation, the notion of language as 'true' carrier is countered by an associated potential as harbinger of disease, infection, pollution and corruption, and simultaneously undone by its homonym – for 'pigeon' can also mean a decoy.⁸

Preoccupations with precursors and beginnings pervade dictionary definitions of 'pidgin'. Peppered with firsts, chief, secondary, minor, denigrated as 'trivial' and 'derivative' (Steiner, 1975: 44), its very name is thought to be a 'corruption', a Chinese mispronunciation of 'business' (Sebba, 1997: 26). In their ever-increasing proliferations, pidgins deflect and defer questions of origins, attesting rather to relations of trade and power concomitant with contexts and processes of colonization and globalization, as suggested by the non-exhaustive or exclusive classifications or 'broad types' proffered by linguists:

1. Military and police pidgins
2. Seafaring and trade pidgins and creoles
3. Plantation pidgins and creoles
4. Mine and construction pidgins
5. Immigrants' pidgins
6. Tourist pidgins
7. Urban contact vernaculars (Sebba, 1997: 27)

The earliest known European pidgin ('Sabir' or 'Lingua Franca') is of military origin, thought to have emerged after the late 11th century with the Crusades (Sebba, 1997). Its retrospective designation arises however out of the 'mispronunciation' classifying one of the oldest varieties of English-lexicon, non-native secondary or auxiliary 'makeshift' languages, necessitated by and historically intertwined with economic relations between European colonial and Chinese imperial powers. In turn, with possible roots in an earlier Portuguese pidgin used around the Macau from the mid 16th century, Chinese Pidgin English, or CPE, emerged and developed into a regional 'lingua franca' (Welsh, 1997: 46).⁹ From the establishment of a trading station in Canton (Guangzhou) in 1664 to the opening of several treaty ports to foreign trade following the Opium War around 1843, CPE – comprising 'a vocabulary of English, Chinese, Portuguese and Anglo-Indian words arranged according to Cantonese syntax' (Welsh, 1997) – came to serve as a 'socially neutral' common language, facilitating communication between Europeans and Chinese 'at arm's length'.¹⁰

As a 'contact zone' between not two but, here, at least four languages, pidgin may entail the appropriation and transformation not of a single 'dominant' tongue, but of several coterminous languages. Rather than taking 'first' and 'primary' as designations of some untainted a priori original, such terms may be read as impositions indicative of hierarchical economic and political

relations between synchronic cultures, whose diachronic ranking hazardously disregards the at least two-way traffic already jamming the proverbial streets. Whether one 'begins' with English, Chinese, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish or Arabic, the to-and-fro translation of pidgin intimates the incessant and mutual susceptibility and capacity for invention and 'adulteration'.¹¹

Chinglish Pinyin English

CPE is said to have completed a 300-year 'life cycle', falling out of use from about 1900 (Sebba, 1997: 67). It might be argued, however, that the increasingly widespread teaching of Standard English in mainland China over the last century has ironically brought about a certain revitalization of CPE in the form of 'Chinglish', the poor English translations found in many public places, whose erroneous vocabulary and grammar arise in part from combinations of careless spelling, out-of-date textbooks and literal translations of Chinese colloquialisms and idioms. A cause of amusement for foreigners and embarrassment to the Beijing government (who a month after their confirmation in 2002 as host for the 2008 Olympics Games, launched a campaign to eradicate Chinglish by this date),¹² its prevalence is apparent not only as a means of communication between locals and foreigners, but also between locals and peoples from other regions in China (whose dialects may be mutually unintelligible) as a *lingua franca*.

If 'standard' or 'print' languages come to hierarchically distinguish geographies and subjects, economically and politically empowered or disempowered according to their ability, or otherwise, to speak the 'standard', they also succeed in rendering other dialects (a social rather than linguistic distinction) inferior (Anderson, 1991). Like 'Standard English', the notion of 'Standard Chinese' serves nation- and economy-building interests, belying a multiplicity of ethnicities and language.¹³

China . . . is not a simple, homogeneous nation, and the Chinese language has a complex political relationship to the notion of 'China.' Within China there is not just one language, but a multiplicity of languages, ranging from Tibetan and Mongolian to the majority Han language. Even in the Han language, the spoken form has hundreds of different varieties, many of them as different as Spanish from Italian. The official language, 'Mandarin,' or *putonghua*, serves the same political function as English once did in the British Isles, to integrate the nation, or as English did for the old 'British Empire.' Like English across the empire, even *putonghua*, the standard language, is spoken in different ways in different parts of mainland China, which have immediate political readings and effects. And then there are Taiwan and Hong Kong, with their form of the standard language existing alongside other forms of Chinese or other languages. (Hodge and Kam, 1998: 9)

Language is the mate of empire. (Manuel de Nebrija)¹⁴

A friend performs an interesting slippage, repeatedly referring to *PIDGIN* as *PINYIN* – in a sense, pidgin's 'other'. For whereas pinyin denotes a Romanized transliteration of written Chinese characters, authorized in the late 1950s in a drive to standardize Chinese in translation, pidgin (here in its Chinglish variations), by contrast, may be said to arise out of unauthorized translations and ad hoc improvisations, occupying a fluid orality between written standards.¹⁵ Where pinyin serves alongside Mandarin or Putonghua (literally, 'common speech') as a means of homogenizing and solidifying Chinese against the dominance of English (and by extension against numerous other Chinese 'dialects'), pidgin neither favours nor fears the supremacy of any language, sited as it is in the perforated borders in-between.

Since the 1984 signing of the Sino–British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong's future, contestations over language as a site of power, authority and identity have been particularly evident in controversies surrounding the official medium of instruction in Hong Kong's schools. In spite of the dominance of Anglo-Chinese schools during colonial rule, in which English was designated as the official language of instruction, the government continuously faced issues over the competency of usage and pervasiveness of Chinglish in the teaching–learning process. Concurrently, recommendations regarding the learning of Putonghua have seen a shift from optional extracurricular activity to a core curriculum subject, and as post-reunification trade with China continues to expand, so speculations increase that it will eventually supplant English and Cantonese as the language of instruction, power, government (Postiglione, 1996: 98–123).

Such trends have been met with resistance from those who regard Cantonese, and even Chinglish, as Hong Kong's mother tongue, whose idiosyncracies are seen as crucial to its cultural identity. As Kwai-Cheung Lo (2000) writes:

... the vitality of Hong Kong's language, many believe, lies precisely in its intractability to the taming by standard Chinese.

The language of Hong Kong ... is a schizophrenic contextual combination of the vernacular Cantonese, the written form of Chinese, and verbal, written, and broken English. Many cultural critics of Hong Kong are proud of this hybrid language, and they see in this linguistic predicament as a *positive* opportunity both for constructing a critical discourse against pure Chinese national tradition and for problematizing the classic binary opposition between East and West. (pp. 185–6, original emphasis)

Abstract notions of an 'essential' Chinese (or English) subject and a 'standard' Chinese (or English) language often come hand in hand, concealing a multiplicity of mutually unintelligible languages, ethnicities and identities (DeFrancis, 1984, cited in Chow, 2000: 8). Enforced, according to Rey Chow (2000), as 'a sign of the systematic *codification and management*

of *ethnicity* that is typical of modernity', Lo (2000, original emphasis) identifies the role of a written or print standard in the suppression of 'the political chaos of the voice, a chaos that disrupts the tidiness and self-transparency of the logos that is the nation' (p. 186). Chow (2000) adds that:

Mandarin is, properly speaking, also *the white man's Chinese*, the Chinese that receives its international authentication as 'standard Chinese' in part because, among the many forms of Chinese speeches, it is the one inflected with the largest number of foreign, especially Western, accents. (p. 8, original emphasis)

As such, linguistic competence in 'standard Chinese' functions to lend the Western 'outsider' professional credibility and academic authority, a 'status symbol, an additional professional asset', whilst for the so-called Chinese 'insider', the ability to speak the language is frequently taken as an index of ethnic authenticity. Conversely:

Those who are ethnically Chinese but for historical reasons have become linguistically distant or dispossessed are, without exception, deemed inauthentic and lacking. (p. 9)¹⁶

While mainland Chinglish arises out of pragmatic attempts to engage and deploy the economic lingua franca, Hong Kong Chinglish evidences its subjects' imbrication and ambivalence in the linguistic negotiation of a British colonial past and Chinese sovereign present, from a predominantly Cantonese (culturally as well as politically subordinate) position. As a latter day pidgin used widely among young people, professionals, academics and government officials alike, Chinglish signals both a habitual and playful 'shuttling' to and fro (Trinh, 1991: 11–26) of subjects inside and between languages and cultures, a wilful re-pidginization that declares both an affinity to an 'inauthentic' heterogeneous locality, and a distance from ruling authorities or homogeneous nations.

In the decade or so preceding the Handover, questions around the contestation and configuration of power, identity and history on linguistic territory, over language *as* territory and culture, came to the fore in works by a number of contemporary artists from mainland China and Hong Kong. Perhaps the most well known of these is Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky*, an installation consisting of books and hanging scrolls imprinted with some 2000 hand-carved woodblock characters, partially recognizable yet ultimately illegible, as they are all invented. First exhibited in Beijing in 1988 and 1989, the work met with 'considerable perplexity over whether to read [it] as a critique, or as an instantiation of Chinese culture, or as both' (Abe, 2000: 231). Subsequently received in the West to critical acclaim, 'its insertion into a transnational circuit of exhibition [transformed it] from a limited work that responds to primarily local concerns into a commodified, aesthetic spectacle of contemplation and collection' (p. 241). *A Book from the Sky* has been taken up as 'a simple allegory of good (individual expression) against evil

(traditional despotism)' (p. 234), and the excessive labour invested in the work has been interpreted as both a 'representation of oppressive human toil in China' (p. 237) and a representation of authentic Chinese meditative practices. Yet as Abe points out, the very title(s) of the work reflects the slippery specificity of its readings between Chinese and western audiences of differing politics and degrees of literacy, the 'unstable litany of names and translations suggest[ing] the manner in which it is able to elicit a multiplicity of readings, something like a Rorschach test, that reveals the interests and politics of the viewer' (pp. 227–50).¹⁷

Since 1984, Gu Wenda's productions of monumental pseudo seal scripts, following the format of calligraphic copybooks, have caused controversy for the simultaneous invocation and demystification of the written word, at once iconoclastic and glorifying, not of empire but 'the spirit of the absurd' (Chang, 1997: unpaginated; see also Wu, 1999: 36–41). Trained in the specialist classical scholarly art of seal-carving yet unable to comprehend the characters he crafted, Gu's mimicking and reinvention of forms long incomprehensible to many Chinese (except for professional linguists), into an aesthetically convincing yet nonsensical script, multiplies their illegibility and negation of translatability. Gu asks: 'Who writes the truth, and what gets written in or out of history?' (quoted in Kember, 2000[1997]: 200).

Confounding the possibility of a clearcut 'insider-ism' or 'outsider-ism' in relation to supposedly discrete, monolithic and immutable bodies of language and culture, questions around China's heritage(s) and inheritors, its territorial, cultural and linguistic properties and proprietors, are brought into relief in the particular, peculiar context of the Hong Kong. Tsang Tsou Choi, dubbed the 'King of Kowloon' by the local media, has written himself into history by insistently rewriting Hong Kong's past across its territories. For several decades, Tsang has claimed Kowloon as ancestral land wrongfully usurped by a foreign crown without compensation.¹⁸ He makes his protests against dispossession via highly visible calligraphic inscriptions (in a context relatively free of graffiti) from walls and street furniture to flyovers and bus stops, including public places poignant for their proximity to sites of British crown authority, such as the Central Government Offices, Government House and Victoria Park; the demise of colonial power has seen Tsang redirect his claims to symbols of Chinese state authority, though he 'doubts China will return land the British stole' (Silverman, 1997[1996]: 69).

Given the absence of a public arena for the expression of dissent, Tsang invades or defiles existing sites of power, or at least occupies their margins. Usually he places his writing in sites with high pedestrian traffic, where it will have a ready visibility, but he is normally careful not to choose surfaces which are too sensitive, from which his inscriptions would be immediately cleared. Since his calligraphy can be found all over the territory it becomes a trace of its author's wanderings . . . enact[ing] the displacement his texts speak of: the ruler wanders in exile. (Clarke, 2001: 177)

Tsang's writing is described as 'eccentric . . . bold' (Lau, 1997: 10) and 'raw . . . without clear precedent in calligraphic tradition' (Clarke, 2001: 177) a makeshift miming and adaptation of the rhetoric of power, to publicly contest those in possession. In the period preceding the Handover, the re-framing of Tsang's project as art, first by a local curator, then by dint of its appropriation by a number of local artists and designers,¹⁹ prompted outrage and accusations of manipulation (many question Tsang's mental health); yet his work has nevertheless become 'a much-circulated symbol of the local' (p. 181). Previously inscribed objects and surfaces were exhibited between freshly 'defaced' gallery walls, Tsang's public interventions re-presented as artistic installation, translated into a medium adopted by many young Hong Kong artists emerging in the late 1980s. The lack of affordable space for working in traditional media or of a developed market driving the production of art objects as commodities contributes to the popularity of installation, as does its relatively short history and cultural status as the preserve of neither Western nor Chinese canons. Moreover, its transience and particular relation to the specificities of local sites and their histories resonated with the prevalent concerns of a number of artists keen to recuperate local popular and material culture 'for a fragile alternative history', often via traces of the vernacular (pp. 70–99).

Oscar Ho's ongoing works on paper, *Stories Around Town* (1991–), resemble newspaper cartoon strips, combining text and image to fabricate tales based largely on urban myth, sometimes incorporating imitations of Tsang's writing style as well as news stories (on occasion produced for and disseminated in the press itself), questioning the veracity and power of 'truths' and expressing the frustrations and boredom in anticipation of the 'historical moment' encapsulated by the date 'June 30, 1997'.²⁰ In contrast to the interest in written Chinese languages demonstrated by such artists from the mainland as Xu and Gu, a number of artists from Hong Kong display a particular interest in spoken language and Cantonese as the predominant local vernacular. The English titles of various pieces by Antonio Mak render absurd and opaque homonymic and visual/verbal puns revealed only in their Cantonese translation, such as *Bible from Happy Valley* (1992)²¹ (a horse with a large open book across its back for wings symbolizes gamblers' dreams of winning; 'happy valley' is a race course and 'bible' translates into 'shu', which can mean 'book' and 'to lose'). Kith Tsang Tak-Ping translates his *Hello! Hong Kong* series (1996–7)²² by sounding out English with Chinese written characters (a method that harks back to the Cantonese phonological representation of English that typified CPE),²³ while Warren Leung Chi-Wo has monumentalized and memorialized the vernacular in *Dream of a Path* (1996), by engraving items from a 1960s street stall menu into the floor of a former shop space, a 'fake relic' that recovers the lost traces of urban renewal and development. Leung also deploys word play in both titles and inscriptions, notably *Vis(i)ta* (1996–7),²⁴ in which the locations of photographic views of Sun Gai, Gau Long and Heung Gong are occluded from those without adequate knowledge of romanized Cantonese to recognize the otherwise familiar New Territories, Kowloon and Hong Kong

Island; in this way, Leung highlights the dimensions of the local and the linguistic in the hierarchical production of knowledge and designation of territory and ownership, imitating and escaping the dual competitive hegemonies of Standard English and Chinese.

Reflective perhaps of the historical exclusion of Chinese women from reading and writing, hence from centres of power, the artists from mainland China and Hong Kong engaging language appear to be predominantly male. Work by such so-called 'British Chinese' artists as Lesley Sanderson, Yeu-Lai Mo, Mayling To, differently up-rooted from 'motherlands' and 'mother tongues', often articulates a silence or silencing, a speechlessness or sense of speaking into a vacuum.²⁵ Sanderson's 'disappearing act' takes place as her self-image disperses across several works, returning doubled with mouth, face and head bandaged and bound, and speaking only at odds with her collaborative partner, less a dialogue than two monologues comprising Western rhymes and taunts; a solitary Mo mouths an equally limited repetitive script as part of a soundless spectacle, her voice inaudible until disembodied; To's cartoon anti-heroes say nothing.²⁶ However, like their Hong Kong and mainland contemporaries, a common strategy lies in the visual/verbal punning of titles, usually in English, whose 'Chinglishness' resides in the frequent cultural double entendres, for example in Anthony Key's *Free Delivery*, *Great Wall*, *Chips with Everything*, and To's *Pandemonium* and *A Cute Puncture*. As Coco Fusco (2001) comments on the artist David Hammons, 'jokes are there for those who [can] decipher them'. Puns and word games 'short-circuit' the dominant meanings accrued to given objects or terms, 'taking, twisting, and transforming English to make it otherwise'. Paraphrasing Fusco's description of Hammons, these artists might be positioned as sometime investigators of how oppositional, marginalized and diasporic Chinese identities 'can be generated through a dialogue with "high" culture, particularly as it is articulated through Standard English' – and Chinese (pp. 43–8). In the case of *PIDGIN*, such dialogue is generated via the mobilization and performance of language in its emphatically unstable, esoteric and (un)popular forms, both within, with and in excess of a differently esoteric 'fine' or 'high' art context.

PIDGIN strikingly contrasts the aforementioned examples through the sheer proliferation of voices, relentless word and image play, linguistic invention and experimentation. Traversing silences and inarticulacies, the speeches and transliterations generated by *PIDGIN* are compelled by curiosity yet recall the resourcefulness and ingenuity of those historically, linguistically and economically excluded from discourses of power, among them the inventors of the recently discovered *nüshu*, literally 'women's writing', a unique, secret script originating in oral traditions of the southern Chinese province of Hunan, created and used exclusively by women in transgression of a formerly male preserve and defiance of an imposed illiteracy.²⁷

Debunking the myth of flawless standards and steadfast origins, there can be only flaws and fluctuations. Mispronunciations, interruptions, pidgins and Chinglishes – these practices of speaking across move from economic to

cultural necessity. Reliably incompetent in various languages, can we take pleasure in owning up to what some would decry as 'artificial pidgin scholarship' – in more senses than one? (Lui, 1995, cited in Yeh, 2000: 264) *Ngai dai teng deg chut ngo me hai boon dai yan a o? Dan hai* – while some of us do not claim to 'speak about' 'Chinese' and 'Chineseness' with suitably distanced 'authority' or an intimate 'authenticity', we can 'speak nearby': for 'this *is* our pidgin' – our 'business', our responsibility, our affair.

Home

How to make sense of (impulses to) 'home' when the means or mechanisms – political, economic, ideological and linguistic – fall short or fail? Pidgin languages, like the subjects that speak them, '[do] not belong to a particular place', but arrive and depart 'when two or more cultures meet at any border' (Papastergiadis, 2002: unpaginated). Across such hyphenated realities, what is 'home' but an illusory origin, an imaginary centre – several and no places at once? Conceptualizations of diaspora are often formulated around axes of origin and return, centre and periphery. Ien Ang (2000[1998]) notes the tendency to 'favor . . . a hierarchical centering and a linear rerouting back to the imagined ancestral home' (p. 290), a paradigm that suppresses what James Clifford (1997) calls 'the lateral axes of diaspora' – 'the ways in which diasporic identities are produced through creolization and hybridization', and we might add pidginization, 'through both conflictive and collaborative coexistence and intermixture with other cultures'. While 'the empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes solidarity and connection *there* . . . *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation' (pp. 266, 269, original emphases).

As a legally recognized place of domicile and residence, 'home' may locate one as a 'Citizen' here and 'Permanent Resident' there, a status familiar to recent generations of Hong Kong's migrants whose relocations – to Australia, Canada, Britain or the United States – determined by economic, educational and political prerogatives, are often protracted, 'in perpetuity'. When the distances of dispersal are regularly crossed, leaving and arriving may become not events but conditions of living. 'Home' as neither 'there' and 'here', nor 'then' and 'now', but staggered by air-miles or electronic ether in not-quite synchronicity – 'ahead' or 'behind' depending on direction of travel. Such disorientating and exhausting looping and curving of identities and histories dispersed through/under/over temporalities, geographies and languages, demand the complex de-configuring and reconfiguring of subjectivities, inadequately approximated by the notion of 'jetlag'. ('Subject/*sujet*-lag?')²⁸ Yet such duplicity and multiplicity, as difficult and often unarticulated mundaneities, may also in part be playfully spoken through linguistic flights 'home' and away, to and from 'the home we make, or the homes that are made for us . . . which [are] anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began' (Rushdie, 1992: 57).

Precisely because translation is an activity that immediately problematizes the ontological hierarchy of languages – ‘which is primary and which is secondary?’ – it is also the place where the oldest prejudices about origins and derivations come into play most forcefully . . . (Chow, 1995: 184)

Emerging as a necessary and imaginative leap, miming, seducing, intertwining, pidgin glances sidelong in more than one direction, at a supposed ‘first’, ‘original’ language, but also at others. Having no time or need to discriminate between virginal originals and tainted derivatives, pidgin presumes and embodies indiscretion, treating and treading supposedly discrete bodies of languages and cultures as porous and malleable media of transformation, ‘corrupt’ from the outset, amorphous like water. As a mode of translation, pidgin upsets and contradicts conventional expectations – that it should entail a uni-directional movement (from the ‘original’), that it should be ‘natural’, and self-effacing, covering its tracks. Contravening limits, pidgin moves in several directions, making its betrayals and deceptions explicit.²⁹ Emphatically ‘bad’, it sounds aloud its translatedness, the tracks of its trespass everywhere announcing its un-originality and infidelity.³⁰ Pidgin is, as Papastergiadis (2002) puts it, ‘promiscuous’ – its promiscuity the very ‘poetry of translation’.

The purpose of dismantling the notion of inferiority is not to supplant it with a true status as equal or superior, but to acknowledge its proliferations and condition, as with all speech, as tactical. If pidgin arises out of incomprehension and imposition, can it signal not only a process of acclimatization, but also one of subversion? The artist Steve Ouditt, a ‘post-independence American/English-educated Christian Indian Trinidadian West Indian male artist’ (Tawadros, 1998: unpaginated), speaks of ‘creole insite’; perhaps we can also speak of ‘pidgin insite’. Ouditt’s condensation of ‘insight’ and ‘site’ alerts us to the historical and geographical specificity and boundedness of creole experience, insight and site made intimate and inextricable, yet also unstable. ‘Creole’ shifts the classificatory practice of naming onto similarly unsteady territory with uneasily determined borders, intimating not only nation and ethnicity but also language and generation, an attempt to resist the summary inclusion and erasure of such differences as ‘Amerindian Caribbean’ or ‘Indo Caribbean’ under a privileged, normalizing, all-embracing term, ‘Afro-Caribbean’ – ‘the blanket term for any ‘Caribbean’ in England’ (Ouditt, in Tawadros, 1998: 8).

If ‘creole insite’ may come with processes of ‘recreolization’, not the assimilation and elaboration of the pidgin of a previous generation into a native tongue (Pinker, 1994: 33) but a purposefully acquired *learnt* language, mobilized with English in code-switching practices that reinvent and inscribe the specificities and ambiguities of social, cultural and linguistic spaces claimed by certain young ‘Black British’ subjects, then perhaps ‘pidgin insite’ may speak of the ‘repidginization’ tactically deployed or performed by certain ‘British Chinese’: insights into and sitings of the ambiguous, uneven, inevitable and infinite collisions and transmutations perpetuating along ‘the

lateral axes of diaspora'. Signalling some of the prosaic, makeshift strategies and experiences of mutual acculturation generated by colonialisms and migrations in the shift from the national to the international to the global; indicative of the experiences, practices and processes of not-quite-same-not-quite-otherness that disregard and dismantle 'appropriate' frameworks;³¹ cautioning against the habitual flattening of historical, geographical, cultural and generational differences in such dominant, competitive, sweeping linguistic and ethno-national categories as 'English' and 'Chinese'.³² Can we speak of 'pidgin English cultures'? What, then, of 'pidgin Chinese cultures'? Pidgin cultures and pidgin aesthetics?

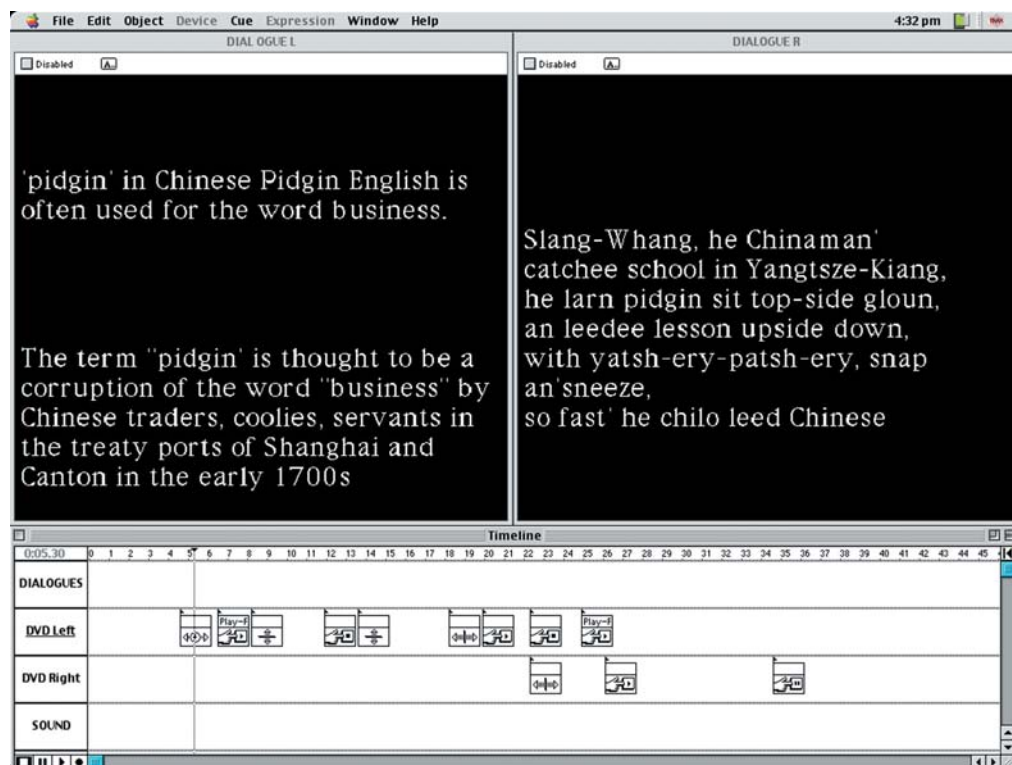
*

Native speakers may not know this, but English is a scabrous mouthful . . . I always hear myself displacing the two languages, conflating them – maybe conflagrating them – for there's so much rubbing and friction, a fire always threatens to blow up between the tongues. Friction, affliction. (Lee, 1995: 217–8)

A screen goes dark – a broken transmission, a lapse into silence and the unspoken, unwritten. Barthes' evocation of language recalls the body and flesh, the muscle and cord that g/rasps, rasps and speaks, locating its irrefutable materiality beside its impalpability. Embodied, embedded as possibility, it is intimate, curious, sexually charged and sensuous, activating a frisson, a tension, a 'rub'. There is a sense of language as a fraught and sexualized territory, inflections of ethnicity adding a hint of miscegenation to the notion of 'corruption', though this is underplayed. Words are glimpsed and glanced, tender and awkward touches ventured like the determined yet slightly embarrassed fumbblings of a new lover. 'Do you translate by eye or by ear?' asks Trinh, elsewhere (1992: 80). By eye, by ear, by touch. In the recurring motif of 'Chinese Whispers', a 'scene of translations', lips repeatedly approach the ear of another . . .

. . . frequencies, fibrillations, somatic vibrations and shivers, acoustic perturbation, hand–face movements, flapping arms–wrists, lip suction, mouth-pump action, darting eyes, frowns, voice tone, tremor, pitch . . . (Maharaj, 2000: 40)

This is 'the space of orality' (p. 40), a space which coincides here with pidgin, the not-one, not-other, the none and several in motion. Silences accumulate, culminating in an anti-climatic, bemused and bemusing utterance, the 'final' translation revealing something strange, confused and unresolved. Words are dropped, displaced and invented, compensating for the misheard and unknown, conjuring a peculiar sense out of nonsense, and nonsense out of sense, as language is given 'legs' in the pursuit of play, its meanings spiralling out of the circle. Who dares to hazard a word and be (mis)heard – admit to a not-knowing, not-quite placing? Pleasure in the corruption, the subversion and invention; pleasure in mistranslation.





Figures 5, 6 and 7 *PIDGIN: interrupted transmission*, installation photographs. Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella in association with Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art and Design. Supported by Arts Council England. Images © 2001 Erika Tan and Bevis Bowden.

Notes

1. This article is developed from an exhibition review and conference paper (2002a, 2002b). The title refers to 'The Translator's Notes', an exhibition curated by Irene Amore for Café Gallery Projects, London (26 March–20 April 2003), which took as a point of departure an essay by José Ortega y Gasset (2000[1937]: 49–63). Commissioned to make a new video/audio work, my *Notes On Return* (2003) referenced in turn a bilingual text by the poet Bei Dao (1994: 72–3). These doublings intimate the non-originary 'where from' and 'how' of my speaking, intimate and distanced, 'outside in, inside out' in relation to the disciplinary, discursive, cultural and conceptual frames across which many of us 'shuttle' (Trinh, 1991: 65–78); in this instance literally – my image and voice appear both in the work and documentation of *PIDGIN*.
2. The erroneous transcription is mine; Tan's own transcription reads, 'Language is a skill that legs to toys.' The 'original' (translated) quotation (Barthes, 1990[1977]: 73), appears in the exhibition catalogue (Willmoth, 2002: unpaginated).

3. Erika Tan's *PIDGIN: interrupted transmission*, a Film and Video Umbrella commission, toured from Norwich Gallery (28 November–20 December 2001) to Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth (9 March–20 April 2002).
4. 'Contact zone' is a phrase used by Mary Louise Pratt to characterize the space of encounter between China and the West, which Arif Dirlik elaborates as a 'zone of domination' as well as 'mediation'; cited by Yeh, (2000: 251–80). Contact languages are 'so called because they come about through contact between two or more existing languages' (Sebba, 1997: 2).
5. A "corruption" or "distortion" of English', 'a "jargon" of some sort', (Sebba, 1997: 1) or 'a medium sized bird with a stocky body and short legs . . . often trained for racing and carrying messages' (Thompson, 1998: 667).
6. 'Pidgin' and 'pigeon' share the same IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) pronunciation (Thompson, 1998).
7. One speaker is from Athens and another is from the south, so the sounds of two different Greek languages are spoken between the two (unpublished correspondence with the artist). Sebba (1997) offers a broad definition of creole as 'pidgins which have become native languages for their speakers' (p. 16).
8. As in 'stool-pigeon' – originally a decoy of a pigeon fixed to a stool – it can signify 'somebody who is easily swindled or deceived' (Thompson, 1998: 898).
9. Welsh describes pidgin as a lingua franca, which Sebba (1997) notes is derived from 'Lingua Franca', 'a Medieval trading pidgin used in the Mediterranean – an important marine trading zone where traders' native languages included many very different languages such as Portuguese, Greek, Arabic and Turkish'; also 'a language of wider communication . . . native only to some', for example Swahili, and internationally, English (pp. 16–17).
10. Hall (1966) cited in Sebba (1997: 66–7). Sebba argues that because pidgin is 'no-one's native language, "all speakers are equal" – there are no native speakers with a "superior" knowledge of the language. Pidgins may therefore be seen as socially neutral, even though they may also have a low status' (pp. 16–17).
11. Welsh (1997) offers the following examples of words that have passed into 'common usage': "shroff", originally assayer and money changer, "chop", seal or permit, and "godown", warehouse, "amah", nurse, are Portuguese; "hong", factory or firm, "taipan", "junk" and "chow" are Chinese' (p. 46).
12. 'Beijing Clamps Down on Chinglish', 14 August 2001, *BBC NEWS*, URL (consulted October 2003): <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1491288.stm>
13. 'According to McArthur (1993), "Standard English" as a term was first used during the Industrial Revolution in Britain, when having "standard" parts became important for mass-production' (Sebba, 1997: 6).
14. Cited in Sebba (1997: 7). Sebba summarizes the spread of standard languages as having

a functional role in nation and empire building during the era when large nation-states like Spain and France were being established in Europe and creating empires abroad through trade and colonisation; . . . reinforced and consolidated by the advent of printed books. . . and, later, by industrialisation and the introduction of mass media.
15. Established for diplomatic, official and media uses, introduced in 1959 and adopted by the PRC in 1979.
16. When one 'other' attempts to speak in relation to another 'other', those who subscribe to the 'insider/outsider' paradigm are liable to get confused or affronted; Vietnamese-born-academic-theorist-filmmaker-hybrid Trinh T. Minh-ha, based in the States via Paris and Senegal, neither 'authentic Chinese' nor an

- 'authoritative Chinese scholar', has been challenged over her work 'on China'. Trinh's response (which is also a response to assumptions that her films should be in and about Vietnam) is simply, 'Why Vietnam?' (Trinh, 1999: 219).
17. As Abe (1999) notes, its names have varied from *Fenxi Shijie de Shu* (A Book that Analyses the World), to *Tian Shu* (A Book from the Sky or Nonsense Writing), to *Xishu Jian* or *Xishu Jian: Shijimo Yuan* (variously translated as An Analysed Reflection of the World, A Mirror that Analyses the World, and Analytical Mirrors of the World: The Final Volumes of the Century or Fin de Siècle Volumes). Wu Hung adds Heavenly Book to the litany (pp. 30–4).
 18. Tsang claims this is recorded in a family ancestral book from his home village of Liantang in Guangdong province (Lau, 1997: 8–10).
 19. Lau invited artist Lee Ka-Sing to respond to Tsang's work for the exhibition, *Cultural Chop Shui 1*, Fringe Gallery, Hong Kong (4–18 October 1995). Lau later curated *The Street Calligraphy of Tsang Tsou Choi* for the AGFA Gallery, Goethe Institute, Hong Kong (24 April–17 May 1997) and Hong Kong Arts Centre (24 April–6 May 1997).
 20. Oscar Ho, *Stories Around Town* (1991–), ink on paper. Ho featured in *Exhibition 6.30*, Hanart TZ Gallery, curated by Chang Tsong Zung (20–30 June 1997), as did Kith Tsang and Warren Leung.
 21. Antonio Mak, *Bible from Happy Valley* (1992), bronze and lead.
 22. Kith Tsang Tak-Ping, *Hello! Hong Kong* series, 1996–7, mixed media installations.
 23. CPE is strongly influenced by Cantonese in phonology and syntax . . . there is a lack of consonant clusters in Cantonese syllable structure, so when there is a consonant cluster, each consonant is represented by a character – but in Cantonese each character is a syllable i.e. it has a vowel inserted after the consonant. For example 'small' if represented phonologically is written in 3 characters i.e.: simala or change = cheenchee, count = conta. . . . (Shi, 1993: 459, cited in Willmoth, 2002).
 24. Warren Leung Chi-Wo, *Dream of a Path* (1996), site-specific engravings; *Vis(i)ta* (1996–7), wood, zinc plate, mirror, iron, liquid light.
 25. Tan for example, born in Singapore and based in Britain, was trained in Britain and Beijing. Her identity card states Hokkien as a mother tongue yet she speaks English and what she refers to as her own pidgin Mandarin Chinese, a result of mixed parentage and schooling.
 26. See for instance Lesley Sanderson's drawings, *He Took Fabulous Trips* (1990), *Can't See the Wood for the Trees* (1992), and the later mixed media installation project with Neil Conroy, *Here We Are* (2005); Yeu-Lai Mo's video, *Service, Licking, Kissing* (1997); Mayling To's soft sculptures, *A Cute Puncture* (1998) and *Repertoire Dog* (1999), and videos *Living* (2001) and *Being* (2001).
 27. For an introduction to *nüshu*, see McLaren (1998: unpaginated).
 28. The notion was suggested to me upon hearing the jet-lagged delivery of a conference paper (Ford, 2002).
 29. Interestingly, 'pigeon' can signify 'a person easily swindled' (Thompson, 1998: 668).
 30. It is assumed that translation means a movement from the 'original' to the language of 'translation' but not vice versa: it is assumed that the value of translation is derived solely from the 'original,' which is the authenticator of itself and of its subsequent versions. Of the 'translation,' a tyrannical demand is made: the translation must perform its task of conveying the 'original' without leaving its own traces; the 'originality of the translation' must lie 'in self-effacement, a vanishing act'. (Chow, 1995: 184)

31. Ouditt avoids the term diaspora; perhaps, as a noun it suggests too coherent an entity. Even when qualified by Ang as a 'loose paradigm', a perspective 'motivated . . . by notions of dispersal, mobility and disappearance' which '[work] against its consolidation as a paradigm proper', in which 'the seeds of its own deconstruction' are contained, grammatical convention competes against conceptual will. As with creole, pidgin may be said to name a practice or practices, processes and experiences in which no 'settling' is possible for, as Ouditt puts it, 'To settle is to flatten . . .'
32. Echoing Ouditt, how does 'British Chinese' even begin to locate, for example, the linguistic and experiential differences of first, second, third generations from mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Caribbean or South Africa, in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales?

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